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ON THE IMMORTALITY OF EXAMINATION PESTS

By EDWARD F. HAUCH

THERE was a time when the touchstone of the hopeful high school graduate's fitness to enter cloistered college halls was his fluency in declining in faultless German the biological curiosities, *Reptil*, *Animal* and *Fossil*. A little search among old and happily forgotten examination papers might easily add *Amphibium* and *Krokodil* to the list. I am tempted to suggest in passing that the examiner, in spite of appearances to the contrary, was not wholly void of humane and scholarly intentions. Let us credit him at least with the well-meant attempt to furnish his prospective student with a correct and adequate nomenclature for the academic menagerie that was to furnish him a doleful amusement during the more tedious hours of the coming college years.

Lest one linguistic field should prove insufficient for his entertainment, we took care to provide him with a few *joujoux* from somewhere else: a few *cailloux* to throw at the *Animalien*, or if he preferred a less deadly missile, a *chou* or two. These might serve to scare away at least the *hiboux* and still leave him sufficiently helpless for ordinary disciplinary purposes before whatever other pests the faultless rhythm of the deathless list might suggest.

Fuss enough was made over these pedagogic *joujoux* in days gone by to keep the minds of the helpless victims in lifelong confusion about them. Did *you* ever have trouble on the spur of the hectic and unhappy fraction of a moment in instantaneously recalling whether it was *s* or *x* that these beasts took with them when a whole lot of them went off on a witches' Sabbath together? If you did, you know how it feels to be the *joujou* of fate and pedantry in its playful mood.

The Big Noise about the Direct Method and similar plans of salvation have put to flight the creatures of the night and slime. They no longer stare at us with their one-time boldness out of the cold type of college entrance examination papers. The human race is irrevocably committed to progress, so we are told, and learning, more or less unwillingly, moves on with the rest of the procession. Yes, there has been a house-cleaning. The evil spirits have been exorcised; the house is empty, swept and garnished—and ready for new tenants no less evil than the first! Ghosts are hard to lay in these piping times of ouija boards, and seasoned pedantry dies hard. The documentary evidence that I have in hand to this effect bears a date considerably less than twenty, or fifteen, or even five, years back. Nor is it the product of some obscure, small, forgotten, stick-to-your-guns-at-all-costs, one-horse college; it is statewide in its application in one of the biggest and most progressive states in all the Union.

Of the one hundred, or two hundred, or possibly several thousand, bromides with which the unlettered Sancho Panza ekes out the meagre schooling of his thread-bare speech, here are a few that, judging by the documents before me, young Americans, after two years of study (of “proverbios,” or of Spanish?) are expected, not only to know, but to *explain in Spanish*:

No hay mal que por bien no venga
Del dicho al hecho hay mucho trecho
No hay mal que dure cien años (Let's hope so!)
Mas vale buen callar que mal hablar
Mas vale tarde que nunca
No hay miel sin hiel

In most cases the meaning is obvious enough. Even where it is not, it might still be inferred from the context if there were a context with which to connect it. But to provide it, would be making things much too easy for the ambitious two-year-old. It is apparently the business of the examiner, not to test knowledge of Spanish in more or less natural textual environment, but to kill where and while the killing is good. Even then the two-year-old might escape easily enough, for he has a choice of three out of the six “proverbios.” But what abysmal lack, or fiendish superabundance, of a sense of humor prompts the cheerful executioner to ask his trembling victim to explain in Spanish, for example:

"Mas vale tarde que nunca"? The very rights of man could not be more self-evident! Verily might we say with Sancho: "Del dicho al hecho," etc.

Sancho-like—I too am a pedagogue—I can not resist the impulse to interrupt myself long enough at this point to relate a little anecdote that occurs to me. In a little district school the reading lesson for the day was about a poor old Indian who, after the lapse of years, comes back to the haunts of a happier young manhood to gaze in dejection upon what to him were the brutal ravages of a superior civilization. A little barefoot urchin was reading, with every evidence of due appreciation of the pathos of the story, about how in his dejection "the Indian leaned against a tree," etc. But the tyrant of the ferule was not satisfied. In fact, he was duly irritated at the soulful interpretation of the scene. Something had to be done to bring the boy back to painful, school-room reality. "What does that mean?" he thundered, "'The Indian leaned against a tree?'" The dazed Dodridge Watts Weaver—the name was not his only affliction—hesitated a moment, then rallied and informed his tormentor that he supposed it meant he leaned against a tree. That was about as far as he could get, and in desperation—at heart he was no coward—he finally challenged the irate tyrant to do better if he thought he could. The nearest *he* could get to it when he took up the challenge was: "Why, it means, it means, of course it means the Indian took up an accommodating position against the tree!" Hands up all you who can come any nearer in Spanish to "Mas vale tarde que nunca," or even, "No hay miel sin hiel"!

This is followed up on the same paper with the request, couched in polite Spanish, to translate, among other things:

He cut his Spanish class
He broke his engagement
He can not help doing it

Could any real red-blooded American youth, after wrestling with the problem of de-sanchoizing some of the above "proverbios," be blamed for cutting his Spanish classes forever after, or breaking other things besides mere engagements? Or would he stand by the phrase of least resistance and accept the examiner's alibi: "He can not help doing it"?

Let us hope the red-blooded American youth tempers with the discretion of the Yankee the valor of more impulsive breeds; better days are in store for him. At the end of a third year the examiner, for some reason or other, relents and is now willing to listen to explanations, in more or less perfect American, to "modismos" such as these:

Abrir una boca de vara y media
Tener el pie en dos zapatos
Bailar al son que me tocan
Tener malas pulgas
Hacer ver a uno las estrellas

Here at least is progress; no more *Reptilien*, no more *Krokodilien*, only *malas pulgas* now!

Let us suppose the average high school pupil has sat long enough at the feet of Sancho to learn the several hundred "modismos" he will need to meet successfully the ingenious caprice of the examiner in his indiscriminate choice. Let us suppose he has acquired, besides, a good working knowledge of the future subjunctive of *arrepentirse* and the common uses of *placer* with a personal subject, for the honorable mention of these things on the examination paper may easily mislead the unwary average high school teacher into supposing that they are needful in getting, if not into heaven, at least into college. After these achievements, how much time will the average high school pupil have left out of his thirty-eight minutes per day, five days per week for three years, for the scarcely less essential commonplaces of plain, but more or less polished, Spanish? When in the course of the first two years will he get the seventy-five homely Spanish words for the due consideration of the truly vital question suggested, among others, as a test of his ability in free composition: "Porque estudio yo el español?" Well might he ask! Or what "unas ciento treinta palabras" at the end of three years would do justice to the theme: "La utilidad del idioma español?"

As a matter of fact, the examiner seems sufficiently aware of the difficulty. If the pupil claims credit for oral work, he is privileged to ignore Sancho and also the future subjunctive and the uses of *placer* with the subject in the first person singular. If, on the other hand, modesty, or candor, or the State Inspector for Modern Languages forbids him to make such claims, he is

not expected to know why he studies Spanish. At the end of three years, ignorance of its utility will not suffice to damn him; at least, he will not have to tell all about it in Spanish.

I have no quarrel with free composition in a foreign language as a classroom exercise. But an examination paper, if anything, should be as simple, concrete and definite as it is possible to make it. It should furnish no vestige of excuse for vague and non-descript lucubrations. What have those to say about the utility of free composition exercises on examination papers who are doomed, *ex officio* or otherwise, to pass judgment from year to year upon the rubbish? After a by no means meagre experience, at least with second year answer papers, I for one can not fool myself into believing that much of it really is free composition. Much of it is obviously an attempt at translation of an English original that the pupil hastily fabricates for himself as he goes along. It is not necessary to dwell in detail upon the usual result.

II

Why can he "not help doing it"? Not mere lust for scalps, zeal for the pedagogic cause has made him mad. Pedagogic dignity and the appearances of profound erudition must be kept up even on elementary examination papers. These things look impressive—at least to the unsophisticated. Thus works the logic in his subconscious mind. More consciously, the theory is this: If the pupil can work the *Fossil*, *aïeul* and *pulgas* puzzles, he surely is an expert with the more homely and useful, the more immediate and obvious, but less picturesque, vocabulary and idiom of everyday reading and experience. Often enough, he is nothing of the kind. The trouble with the theory is that it is all wrong.

The chief trouble with examination questions such as these under discussion is that they tend to misplace the emphasis in the teaching. It has come under my own observation that pupils could decline *Fossil* with brilliant perfection and at the same time managed to fail utterly in the attempt at correct usage of such commonplaces as *Haus*, *Stadt*, *Strasse*. They "got away with" *Er werde geliebt worden sein*, but the much simpler *Er wurde gesehen* was too much for them. I am told that even the hypothetical future subjunctive of *arrepentirse* did not seem to be wholly outside of the direct method experiences of the pupils of

at least one particular school, but that certain other matters much more within the range of direct common human experience seemed to present much more formidable difficulties. The reason is obvious.

Nor is the average high school teacher at all to be blamed if he has not the courage to go boldly on and teach what seems to him really vital, regardless of examination papers. For many teachers examination papers, in part at least, are a guide to his teaching material. He has a right to regard them as such. If he teaches *chinoiserie* as a result, the blame should fall on those who set the papers.

III

If our teaching and examining is to be sound pedagogically, we must be as positive as human fallibility will permit us to be on at least two primary, and fundamentally vital, considerations:

1. The real purpose of foreign language study in general
2. The limitations of the high school classroom in relation to this general purpose.

We know in a measure what we are driving at in the way of general linguistic equipment, but we have too much and too long neglected careful study of the proper function of the classroom in relation to the general purpose of language study. In our enthusiasm for the direct method we are all too much inclined to take for granted that the classroom can accomplish everything. We have not yet satisfactorily answered the question: What constitutes a reasonable achievement in a given high school course? We have not delimited closely enough our high school aims in language teaching. Only when this has been done can we proceed with safety to a third consideration: *method*.

So far, direct methodists, no less than others, we have been all too pretentious and diffuse with regard to our program of aims. Even a three year high school course can not make accomplished linguists out of average high school pupils, and yet this is what some of us seem to have been attempting. It would be far more helpful if we restricted our classroom aim to the achievement of a decent and comfortable reading knowledge of the language taught. If we succeeded in this, we should be accomplishing much more than is usually the case with our much broader and more ambitious programs.

I am not for a moment pleading for a return to the old grammatical and translation practices. Nothing in our work could be more calamitous than that. The most rapid and most profitable progress toward the "decent and comfortable" reading knowledge desired is by the arduous road of constant, systematic and energetic oral and aural drill. It is in relation to a restricted and concentrated aim for a good reading knowledge that direct method practices can become really useful in our work. The pupil's progress in learning to read English was greatly facilitated by the speaking knowledge he had already acquired before attempting the task of learning to read. Oral and aural drill in the foreign language has an analogous effect upon his acquisition of a reading knowledge of it. Of course, almost from the very beginning, this oral practice must be supplemented constantly with written work based upon it, and constant exercise in applying the language power thus acquired in practice in reading suitable texts in the foreign language.

Oral and aural drill, besides being the most useful instrument in the acquisition of a useful reading knowledge, is also the best means of anticipating the exigencies of a college career or an occupation in which a knowledge of foreign languages is useful or necessary. A three year high school course will not regularly produce accomplished linguists in every sense of the term. It can produce a good reading knowledge and a good foundation for future progress in the language, only, however, if we as teachers have the common honesty to restrict our aim to something we can really accomplish instead of making a spectacular, but brilliantly farcical, attempt at accomplishing the impossible.

IV

So far as a reading knowledge is concerned, well-chosen passages from the foreign text for translation into English are probably on the whole as good a test as is necessary, even if this form of test does not wholly satisfy all possible theoretical requirements. So long as pupils and teachers alike are subject to common human frailty of judgment, and they always will be, it is wise to have in addition such questions on grammar, syntax and idiom as will encourage the sort of oral and written drill that is most helpful in acquiring the reading knowledge desired. It

may be said that this is in effect the purpose of the very examination questions here criticized. In that case credit must be given to those responsible at least for their good intentions, even if fear of making things too easy for their *joujoux* has robbed them of some of the courage of their convictions. We have managed to get the high school personnel, teacher and pupil alike, into a rather unwholesome state of mind with regard to easy examination questions. We have educated them to expect "stickers," and they think all their labors in vain if a paper happens to look easy to them. A high school teacher once came to me with the information that a certain paper was ridiculously easy. It was my painful privilege to inform her that I had read the answers furnished by her pupils, and that a rather formidable proportion of them had failed. I assured her that, had I set the paper, the questions would have been still easier, and even then I could still have kept out of college every one of her pupils whose knowledge of the *essentials* of the subject left too much to be desired.

Examination questions should be easy; no one with a decent knowledge of the subject should be tripped up with *chinoiseries*. At the same time, no one should be allowed to pass whose achievement in the subject is not all but perfect within the restricted limits of a good reading knowledge and the commonplace essentials. With such a knowledge of the subject on the part of the pupil the college could do something even if the pupil is all but ignorant of all but the most obvious Sanchoisms and the uses of *placer* in the subjunctive with the pronoun *yo*.

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